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HOUSES OF UIST: memory and dwelling in the Outer Hebrides

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It is because we are the ligature between the dead and the unborn – and not because we are vulnerable to the elements and predators – that we humans require housing.

Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*

One evening in the bar of the Borrodale Hotel in Dalabrog, a tourist was enquiring how many people there were on South Uist. He was taken aback when the barman asked if he wanted to include the dead as well as the living.

Parker Pearson, Sharples, and Symonds, *South Uist: archaeology and history*

In this article, I'd like to tell you two stories, or perhaps better, a single story in two parts. The first story is a story with which you'll already be familiar. It's a story about the deep and enduring relationship between houses and memory, and in particular, the mediating role of houses in memories of people, from long-dead others to earlier selves. We're familiar with this story, and indeed we know it to be true, not just from the plethora of academic and non-academic writing to emerge on this theme over the past couple of decades, but from personal experience. It's not too big a risk for me to assume that the reader's own memories are, to a greater or lesser extent, intimately and inextricably framed by houses.

The second story I want to tell is even more obvious than the first, obvious to the point of being banal. It is that houses - and the remains of houses - are the physical marks of dwelling on the land. To say that houses mark dwelling seems so self-evident as to not even merit mention. Yet this self-evidence results, I think, from the fact that these days the majority of us live in cities and towns, where almost by definition, human dwelling is not up for debate nor is it under threat. Residents of Edinburgh, for example, are not required to make a

moral, legal, or political case that the city as a whole is a site of human dwelling. For sure, there are debates aplenty about what kinds of people belong to what parts of the city and how those parts of city should be put to best use, whether in the promotion of more just and equal forms of urban life or simply the generation of capital through gentrification and regeneration, but the idea that cities are fundamentally sites of human dwelling is rarely contested. In this article, however, I describe a place in which dwelling cannot be taken for granted and must instead be constantly restated and the case for it continually remade, a case that I suggest is made through the very physicality of houses, both old and new.

In making this argument, I will be extending and repurposing a concept of dwelling that has now become increasingly influential in both anthropology and archaeology (Bruck & Goodman, 1999; Ingold, 2000; Parker Pearson & Richards, 2003, Richards, 2004; Thomas, 2008; Tonner, 2014) Yet whereas this phenomenologically-inspired “dwelling perspective” has tended to place its emphasis on the synchronic and mutually-constitutive relation between person and world, my emphasis here is primarily on dwelling as a diachronic relation between people, between the living and those who went before. This theoretical reconfiguration of what dwelling might mean retains the important insights of the dwelling perspective - the critique of the false separation of person, experience, and world - but reinserts the fundamentally cumulative and social nature of this relationship, a point to which I return in greater detail further on.

So, these are the two stories I want to tell: the house as site of memory; and the house as site of dwelling. A third story will emerge that is the story of the relation between the two, between memory and dwelling, for their overlap is dense and complex. Our memories of houses are rooted in our own or others’ dwelling within them, just as our knowledge of dwelling is frequently rooted in memory. Yet holding these two perspectives of memory and

dwelling apart, analytically at least, allows us to engage with their differential relations to both time and person, and to understand how and why the demolition of a cherished family home saturated with the most intimate of memories can be understood as an act of continuity, not discontinuity, with the past.

South Uist and its Houses

The setting for this story is the island of South Uist, *Uibhist a Deas*, located towards the southern end of the 130-mile long chain of islands comprising the Outer Hebrides or Western Isles. The Outer Hebrides are located 14 miles north-west of Skye and the Scottish mainland and constitute their own unitary authority, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, based in the islands' only town, Stornoway in Lewis, located far to the north of South Uist. South Uist is connected to the neighbouring small island of Eriskay to the south by an EU-funded causeway built in 2001, and to Benbecula and North Uist by a causeway to the north. The Outer Hebrides as a whole is one of the local authorities with the lowest average income in the UK, as well as the highest rate of fuel poverty in Scotland. South Uist is frequently viewed as the poorest area within the Outer Hebrides, a problem exacerbated by both depopulation - a fall of 42% over the twentieth century – and lack of investment in infrastructure – both transport and communications.

South Uist remains a stronghold for the Gaelic language, and it is spoken by 61% of the population, a decrease from 67% in 2001. The nature of language shift here has been sharp and rapid, to the extent that while most people over the age of 40 grew up in an entirely Gaelic-speaking environment, children today, even those fluent in Gaelic, usually consider English their first language.¹ The people from whose stories and houses this article is constructed are all Gaelic speakers and, as they all pointed out, are of the generation where

none of them spoke a word of English until they entered school. Another facet of South Uist's distinctiveness is the enduring affiliation of the majority of people to Catholicism, unlike the Protestantism of the islands to the north. The particularly Hebridean Catholicism of South Uist, Eriskay, and Barra has a flavour of its own, rooted partly in the fact that it was one of relatively few places where the liturgy was carried out in the local language before Vatican II made this use of the vernacular the norm. The translation from Latin into Gaelic was carried out by the still highly-revered figure of Father Allan MacDonald (Hutchinson, 2010). While neither language nor religion are directly central to this article, I mention them here as important local markers of both perceived cultural continuity with prior generations and of cultural distinctiveness from elsewhere.²

The topography of South Uist is a bit like a table cloth lifted at one side to shake off the crumbs of crofting townships spread out along its western edge. The eastern side of the island is dominated by three mountains and a rugged coast, while the western side is a gently sloping *machair*, a particular kind of dune grassland which constitutes much of the relatively fertile coastal plain. The infertile "blacklands" divide the two, serving primarily as a source of peat and as rough grazing for sheep and cattle. As we shall see, the current distribution of people on South Uist is very much the result of historical shifts, shifts which saw the removal of entire communities from the once heavily-populated eastern side of the island. Today, South Uist is very much a mixed economy. Most of the land is organized into crofting townships, with the crofting land and houses situated along the western coast with its rich machair grazing, and communal grazings up on the eastern hills (Hance, 1951). The communal crofting system, however, is in decline and very few townships make full use of their hill grazings (Hunter, 2015 [1976]). Fishing and fish farming both provide significant income for many people, as does work on the rocket range and employment in the public

sector. The general lack of employment, however, is the major factor in both the depopulation and poverty mentioned above.

Most of the houses in South Uist today correspond to one of three types: “modern” houses of a wide variety of styles built over the past forty years; “traditional” houses of poured concrete, constructed from the First World War to the 1970s, frequently with Ministry of Agriculture subsidy; and the stone “blackhouses”, a form of vernacular Hebridean architecture which stretches back almost unchanged to the time of the Viking occupation (Kissling, 1944; Fenton, 1978).³ These three types of house all co-exist, although the vast majority of blackhouses which are inhabited today have been restored from ruins to make holiday homes for short-term tourists. People continued to live in blackhouses up until the 1970s, but their primary use now is as byres for animals or as stores for agricultural machinery. My neighbour Mairead, now ninety years old, remembers staying with cousins in South Uist and Benbecula in the old thatched blackhouses, *taigh tughaidh*, “thatched house” in Gaelic. “They were so warm and cosy. Dark, but with a fire in the middle of the floor. Two bigger rooms were laid out either side of a small room, the *clòsaid*, where the parents slept.” This kind of house succeeded earlier models of blackhouses which were built on slopes. As Mairead explained, “The animals would be kept inside the lower room of the house, and the slope meant that all of the effluent from them flowed away, while the heat from the animals rose up to warm the rest of the house.” The “traditional” houses of poured concrete offered much more light and space than the old thatched blackhouses, but the concrete itself proved very susceptible to damp and degrades relatively quickly.⁴

Perhaps the first, but not necessarily the most immediately obvious thing to say about houses on South Uist is that the majority of them are uninhabited and in varying states of disintegration and ruin. The ruins of Uist are highly heterogeneous and the Gaelic term

tobhta can refer to anything from the 4,000 year old remains of Atlantic roundhouses to houses built in the 1960s (Parker Pearson, Sharples, & Symonds, 2004). The even earlier Neolithic burial mounds, known as *barpa* in Gaelic, are also spread throughout the island and are recognized by people as marks of human dwelling. Most ruins, however, date from the 18th, 19th, and 20th centuries and are constituted by both blackhouses and the more recent poured concrete “traditional” houses.

Memory

Houses were, and to a great extent still are, the hubs of social life in Uist, most obviously in terms of the domestic realm, but also in terms of the public sphere of inter-household visiting, *a’ dol a chèilidh*. Many people lament the demise of the cèilidh or “visit”, a practice which brought large numbers of people into houses to share songs and stories, food and drink.⁵ As such, cèilidhs were seen as the generative motors of Gaelic oral culture, the source of its transmission and the birthplace of its innovation (Ennew, 1980). In some townships, cèilidhs would take place on an almost rota-like basis, occurring at different houses on different evenings, while in other townships, certain houses would come to be known as the cèilidh house. The social institution of the cèilidh is very much within living memory, but also viewed very much as a thing of the past. One crofter, Micheal Iain, gave me a succinct but accurate explanation of its demise: “television killed it,” (although others point the finger of blame at the radio). People will still *a’ dol a chèilidh*, go visiting, but its social scope has been dramatically contracted to a private visit for tea and biscuits, and this is seen as a very different kind of activity to the cèilidhs of old.

The act of visiting houses was and is tied to visiting their occupants. Thus in Uist, as elsewhere, houses come to be inextricably linked to persons (cf. Carsten & Hugh Jones,

1995). Houses are rarely given poetic or geographically-descriptive names, but rather are referred to by the name of the person with whom the house is most closely associated. In line with the patrilineal nature of the patronymic naming system, this is usually, but not always, the male head of the household (Ardener, 1989; Maconald, 1997). So, for example, *Taigh Dòmhnall Aonghas* is Donald Angus' house, while *Taigh Eachann Beag* is Little Hector's house, and so on. This connection between house and person endures even after the death of the latter, although over time a house may come to be referred to more frequently by its resident head. Yet just as houses are associated with persons, so too, are persons associated with houses. Thus in some instances people are named after houses. For example, people in a western township are known as so and so *An Dùn*, after their house, *An Dùn*, "The Fort". From an administrative and postal point of view houses are known by the number of the croft on which they are located, and when more than one house exists on the same croft they are differentiated with a letter.

Along the road from where I stay, a dilapidated house sits directly on a large rock next to the road, overlooking the strait. This is known as *Taigh Dòmhnall Aonghas*, Donald Angus' house, and has been uninhabited since the death of its owner, *Dòmhnall Aonghas MacIsaac*, at the age of 103. My neighbour Ishbel tells me of her childhood memories of being sent to play there, to keep Donald Angus and his wife company as they had no children of their own. She remembers that there was at least one picture of the Pope and one of Our Lady on every wall. The house is always remembered by people in the township as a very pious one, and another neighbour, Angus, tells me that as a child he remembers that the priest from Eriskay would come over once a week to hear confession in that house for people who were too elderly or infirm to sail across the straits. This was in the days before the road came to Taobh a' Chaolais in 1966, and thus rather than walk to Garrynamonie church, the people of Glendale and Taobh a' Chaolais would attend mass in Eriskay, from whence their parents

came. Angus remembers concocting sins to get time off school, while Mairead recalls merchant seamen, home on leave, unable to cross to Eriskay, and turning up to the confession laid on for the elderly. The priest would not turn them away.

Taigh Domhnall Aonghas is now in a state of disrepair. Several family members have since taken away many of the religious pictures as mementos of the old people who lived there and their values. Occasionally, tourists photograph it for a particular kind of aesthetic: the old range cooker, the broken detritus of domestic life, and the various Marian images.⁶ But for the people who grew up around the house, its memories are of the people and the changes it stands for, and its demise holds little aesthetic value. Ishbel tells me that the house looks so sad and empty that she can barely bear to see it, so happy and full of life as it once was.

In the cases described above, the relationship between person and house remains within living memory despite their ruined condition. As I walked across the middle of neighbouring Benbecula searching for goose nests with Ruairidh, one of the estate gamekeepers, he could name who had lived in many of the ruins. "I knew these people growing up, but now their houses are empty." Yet as we head eastwards, the ruins disintegrate and so too does the dominion of memory: "These are old, old ruins. Ruined in my youth and in my father's youth before that." Of these older ruins, sometimes only a name remains. A friend of mine from Stoneybridge along South Uist's western flank described a childhood playing in *Tobhta Chiorstaidh*, "Kirsty's ruins", yet nobody could remember who precisely Kirsty was. And some ruins do not have even a name; in the loch behind her house, Loch a' Choire, Mairead points at the verdant green of an islet as evidence of its former occupation, "I don't know who lived there, but someone did. You can tell by the fact that it's grass and nettles growing, not heather or the like."

The past couple of decades have seen an explosion of scholarly interest in ruins and ruination, but this constitutes the most recent stage in a fascination with ruins dating back to the 18th century and beyond. As DeSilvey and Edensor point out, “The ruined form is one of the most enduring and complex representational devices in Western tradition” (2012: 465). Ruins have attracted theorizing on modernity (Dawdy, 2010), on ghosts (Mayerfield Bell, 1997), on colonialism (Stoler, 2008), on the politics of aesthetics (Gansky, 2014), and much more. As Schönle puts it, “Somehow we cannot leave ruins alone and let them simply exist in their mute materiality. We need to make them speak and militate for our theories” (2006: 652). Fraser MacDonald offers an antidote to some of this relentless theorizing of ruins, through an attempt to simply follow and retell the stories that a particular ruin might hold (MacDonald, 2014). This article does not constitute a theoretical engagement with ruins nor with the multitude of theoretical engagements ruins have inspired. For sure, these preoccupations with themes of spectrality and affect are not absent from South Uist; one friend described a ruined house as “like a gravestone for the people who lived there”, while ghost stories abound, as do narratives of the affective power of ruins (cf. Navaro-Yashin, 2009). However, my interest in this article is not primarily in the fact of their ruination, but in the mark of past dwelling which ruins constitute for those living in South Uist today.

So this is my first story, a story about the way houses, especially ruined houses, come to be sites of memory. But the story does not end here. It is disrupted and displaced by what at first sight seems to be little more than a brutal pragmatism: the destruction of ruins for new building materials. This constant recycling of the raw materials of houses is not a new phenomenon, but deeply rooted in Uist history. Archaeologists have discovered how for over three millennia house sites are both located on top of prior settlements and also make ample use of old materials in the construction of the new (Parker Pearson, Sharples, and

Symonds, 2004). These days, the stone walls of old ruins are frequently broken up to serve as aggregate for the foundation of new houses and driveways. The houses which suffer such a fate are not restricted to those whose former occupants have passed from living memory, but include houses only recently vacated or abandoned. I have heard several accounts of houses of dearly loved aunties and uncles, or even parents – houses intimately associated with the kinds of memories described above – being torn down to supplement new houses. The renovation of old houses is rare, despite previous government funding, because the earlier generation of stone blackhouses are not suitable to modern living, while the later concrete houses suffer badly from damp. One possible answer as to why people rarely hesitate to demolish old homes could be that the nostalgia so prevalent elsewhere is simply absent from Uist (cf. Angé & Berliner, 2016). However, the answer I wish to provide, and one which constitutes the argument of this article, is that memory and nostalgia are encompassed and subsumed by the claim of dwelling. It is to this second story, the story of the house as a site of dwelling, which I now turn.

Dwelling

Much contemporary writing on dwelling follows the contours of an approach developed by Martin Heidegger in two key late essays (1971a, 1971b). Heidegger's emphasis is on the mutuality of dwelling and building, and their role in an "authentic" engagement with the world. Heidegger contests the chronological ordering of building and dwelling, and instead suggests that building and dwelling are mutually constitutive, thus "We do not dwell because we have built, we build and have built because we dwell, that is because we are dwellers" (1971a: 148). In anthropology, this approach to dwelling has been built upon and extended by Tim Ingold in the elaboration of a "dwelling perspective," a concept which plays a part in Ingold's broader project of getting away from ideas of people "acting upon" nature

(Ingold, 2000). As he puts it, “in dwelling in the world, we do not act *upon* it, or do things *to* it; rather we move along *with* it. Our actions do not transform the world, they are part and parcel of the world’s transforming itself. And that is just another way of saying that they belong to time” (2000: 200 emphasis in original). This “dwelling perspective” has resonated with attempts by archaeologists to understand the ways in which prehistoric peoples lived in the landscape, not simply as a blank canvas upon which they projected “culture”, but as a mutually-constitutive process of transformation (Bruck & Goodman, 1999; Thomas, 2008; Tonner, 2014). Julian Thomas, for example, states that “Dwelling is at once caring for and being cared for, a reciprocal relationship that allows the physical world to reveal its sacred character” (2008: 302). The approach to dwelling I take in this article, runs parallel to but differs from the emphasis placed by Heidegger and Ingold on the nature of the relationship between person and world. Instead, my focus here is on dwelling as a constitutive part of the relationship *between persons*, namely between present and past generations, between the living and the dead.

More specifically, my approach differs in two key shifts of emphasis: firstly, I explore dwelling as diachronic and cumulative, for as Philip Tonner puts it, writing of the “dwelling perspective” in archaeology and anthropology, “Although dwelling humanizes time by contextualizing it within a taskscape, dwelling retains a synchronic dimension: its roots are in the ‘here and now’ or, archaeologically speaking, the ‘then and there’. The dwelling perspective does not address longer sequences of change.” (2014: 149) Secondly, like Heidegger, I see the marks of former dwelling as connecting us to the dead in a social relationship. As he puts it, “The very death, which each individual man must die for himself, which reduces each individual to his own uttermost individuality, this very death and readiness for the sacrifice it demands creates first of all the preliminary communal space from which comradeship springs.” (cited in Tonner, 2014: 144). But whereas for Heidegger,

the primary value of the dead is that they teach us that we, too, will die; for people on Uist, I argue, the primary value of the dead is to demonstrate that we, too, can live.

This alternative approach to dwelling owes a great deal to the perspective developed by Robert Pogue Harrison in his majestic book, *The Dominion of the Dead*, a profound exploration of the foundational role of the dead in human life (Harrison, 2005). Following Vico's genealogical approach, he describes how humans (derived from the Latin *humando* "to bury") inscribe the earth through and with their own mortality. It is recognition of our role as the ephemeral ligature between the dead and the unborn which, according to Pogue Harrison, makes us fully human and which must emerge from a recognition of our debt to the dead: "As Homo sapiens we are born of our biological parents. As human beings we are born of the dead – of the regional ground they occupy, of the languages they inhabited, of the worlds they brought into being, of the many institutional, legal, cultural, and psychological legacies that, through us, connect them to the unborn" (2005: xi). As Pogue Harrison points out, to speak of the dead as foundational is far from metaphorical: "A house was a place where two realms – one under and the other on the earth – interpenetrated each other" (2005: 38). South Uist exemplifies this intimate relation between houses and the dead; the earliest houses on the island, the *barpa* or Neolithic cairns, were built to house not the living, but the dead; while in the Iron Age settlement of Cladh Hallan, the mummified dead were interred in the foundations of the houses of the living (Parker Pearson, Sharples, and Symonds, 2004) Despite the fact that the dead have now been exiled from the homes of the living for over two millennia, this deep and enduring commitment to continuity between prior and present dwelling remains. People are committed to living in places which have been "humanized" by the marks of prior habitation. In what follows, I seek to describe this commitment to dwelling, and perhaps most importantly, to describe precisely both the

historical and contemporary factors which are seen to place this continuity of dwelling under threat.

South Uist and History

It is a fair summation of the history of South Uist to say that every external body seeking to shape the pattern of dwelling there has sought to either concentrate the people or to remove them from the land altogether. Viewed in this light, perceived current pressures to abandon more remote townships, to turn them over to holiday homes, or worse still, wilderness, appear simply as the slightly more benign end of a continuum of state strategy which extends back to the Clearances and beyond. In what follows, I sketch briefly the more recent of these pressures, starting with the infamous “Age of Improvement.”⁷ South Uist had been for many centuries part of the wide-ranging dominion of the MacDonalds of Clanranald, a clan both deeply Jacobite and deeply Catholic. Yet from the early 18th century onwards, the clan-based system of communal ownership went into decline as new ways of thinking about ownership, responsibility, and production emerged. The story of Clanranald’s fall was depressingly typical.⁸ The clan chief, Reginald George MacDonald had been educated at Eton and Oxford, spoke not a word of Gaelic, had never been to Uist, and had accumulated huge, unmanageable debts trying to keep up with the pan-European aristocracy with which he mingled. There was an air of inevitability when in 1838, his Uist estate was sold to an Aberdeenshire banker, John Gordon of Cluny, reputedly the richest “commoner” in Scotland (Stewart, 1998).

Cluny was an exemplar of a new kind of Highland landlord, one to whom a new capitalist rhetoric of improvement and return came naturally. He felt no sense of obligation towards his tenants, for this is what they had become, tenants rather than kinsmen. The decline in the clan system corresponded to a parallel decline in communal living. What had previously

been a well-established mixed subsistence economy focused on cattle, potatoes, barley, and fishing, was transformed with the arrival of a boom bust cycle of capitalist production in the form of the highly-lucrative but highly-volatile kelp industry – a seaweed which is collected and processed in a highly labour-intensive manner for the soap and glass industries (Dodgshon, 1993). To this end, people were cleared from the interior glens and concentrated in newly-formed crofting “townships” along the coast. Here they were allotted crofts, parcels of land deliberately too small to enable subsistence, and thus compelling their inhabitants to seek wage labour at the kelp. The end of the Napoleonic Wars brought the kelp industry to a swift end, as cheaper more productive markets opened up elsewhere (Hunter, 2015 [1976]). The people were now destitute, could no longer pay their crofting rent, and as the estate agent made clear, many faced starvation. Yet if the people of South Uist thought life couldn’t get any worse, they were sadly wrong. For Gordon of Cluny the future prosperity of his estate was to be found in sheep, and the sheep trade, unlike the kelp trade, didn’t need people (Stewart, 1998). And so began an era of clearance, the forcible eviction of the people of Uist from their homes, a process foretold at the end of the 18th century by a Clanranald bard, Angus MacMhurich:

The jaws of the sheep have made the land rich,

But we are told by the prophecy

That sheep would scatter the warriors

And turn their homes into a wilderness.⁹

In 1851, the full process of clearance began, people were captured by estate agents and policeman, often handcuffed, and forcibly placed onto boats bound for Canada (Stewart, 1998). Between two and three thousand – around half the population of the time– were cleared in this manner. The waves of clearance that passed through South Uist are many and

complex. Initial internal clearances during the last years of Clanranald swept the people westward onto the blacklands between the mountains and the fertile machair, and southwards on to the southern shores of Uist and then on to Eriskay. Further clearances under Cluny cleared the people away from South Uist altogether, forcibly evicting them across the Atlantic to Canada. The scale of these clearances was so great that to this day the Gaelic spoken by elderly people in Cape Breton, Canada, is most commonly of the South Uist dialect. There is no shortage of historiography on the Clearances, and no little controversy (see Hunter, 2015 [1976]; Devine, 1994; Richards, 2015).¹⁰ While some, predominantly economic historians, view the Clearances as the unfortunate but inevitable outcome of global economic shifts and over-population (Prebble, 1963) others, primarily social historians, contest the prioritizing of profit over people (Hunter, 2015 [1976]).

While the Clearances remain the low point of the forced movement of people off the land, they are not considered to be an especially “exceptional” period by many local people, but rather, as continuous with both previous and subsequent attempts by “the state” (in any of its public or private guises) to control settlement on Uist. This point is relevant beyond Uist; as Siân Jones writes of elsewhere in the Highlands, “social memory of the Clearances was mobilised to give meaning to current events” (2010: 133). Charles Withers’ work on debates around the memorialization of the Clearances confirms that “This remembered tradition of loss and anger is a powerful determinant of people’s attitudes towards the Highland landscape and to their sense of home” (1996: 340). It is this pulsing, unrelenting pressure to condense or remove the people from Uist that dissuades me from following Ann Stoler’s thesis on “imperial debris” as a diagnostic of a very historically particular process too closely (Stoler, 2008).¹¹ In South Uist there is no neat line to be drawn between the colonial and the post-colonial, or even the pre-colonial. The refusal of planning permission, or of social services provision, or of road incorporation, in the early 21st century are not seen as

qualitatively different to earlier more brutal attempts at population control. Thus many people in South Uist do not seek to chronologically order the events of the past, but rather, subscribe to a view similar to Klee's "angel of history" famously described by Walter Benjamin: "Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet" (1968: 249).

Dwelling Remains

Dòmhnall Iain and Seonag's house sits on a high bluff looking southwards straight down the barrel of the causeway linking South Uist to its southerly neighbour Eriskay. The most striking feature of their house, built in the 1980s, is its pair of convex windows affording views of 180 degrees across the straits towards Eriskay and Barra beyond. Yet it is not these majestic windows nor any other architectural feature of the house to which the planning department of the Western Isles council objected, but rather the very fact of its proposed existence. The house is built at the eastern extremity of Ludag, a place which itself forms the easternmost part of the township of Taobh a' Chaolais, known in English as East Kilbride. Beyond lies the township's common grazings, once used to graze sheep and cattle, but now primarily cut for peat. The council's objection was that any new house should be sited in the main body of the township situated just under a mile to the west, in line with its strategy of concentrating the population as much as possible, and it would therefore not contemplate houses being raised in "uninhabited" parts of the island. But as Dòmhnall Iain knew well, the proposed house site sat side by side with the ruins of prior houses.

These are old ruins, at first sight indistinguishable from the rocks themselves. But one soon sees semblances of order in the rubble, straight lines here and there, which gradually coalesce into the outlines of small houses and outbuildings. These are the remains of homes

built by people cleared out from the fertile Glendale just to the north when it was sold by Gordon of Cluny to a wealthy local farmer, John Ferguson, in exchange for the island of Eriskay.¹² The 36 families which comprised the glen's population were forced down the glen to the shore and lived for several years there as cottars – landless people – on the rocky shore, eking out a living fishing, gathering shellfish, and sowing a few potatoes. The seriousness of the people's destitution was remarked upon by a visiting clergyman, Reverend Norman MacLeod in 1847:

*On the beach the whole population of the country seemed to be met,
gathering the precious cockles. I never witnessed such countenances,
starvation on many faces – the children with their melancholy looks, big
looking knees, shrivelled legs, hollow eyes, swollen-like bellies... God help
them, I never did witness such wretchedness!* (cited in Stewart, 1998: 216)

These families were eventually forced out onto an already over-crowded and impoverished Eriskay, an island which even its own inhabitants acknowledge is little more than a rock in the sea, with very little in the way of cultivable land. Some sixty years later it was the generation of these refugees' grandchildren who returned across the narrow straits upon the foundation of the townships of East Kilbride in 1904 and South Glendale in 1920 through the Congested Districts Board's attempt to reduce congestion on Eriskay.

The specificities of the ruins of these earlier generations – the bonds of memory between house and person – are all but lost. One of the more prominent ruins bears the name *Tobhtaichean na Gille Mòr*, "Ruins of the Big Lad", but who the big lad was is now forgotten. Yet it was through the physical marks of the presence of these former inhabitants that Dòmhnall Iain overcame the council's objection and secured permission for his new house, a

house which became a home to a new generation of Uist people. He carefully photographed and documented these ruins before presenting a dossier of prior dwelling to the planning department in support of his application. Dòmhnall Iain's claim was most obviously a legal one, but it was also, I suggest, a moral one rooted in a history of dwelling and dispossession. People across South Uist cite the struggle of previous generations as both legitimization of and rationale for the maintenance of dwelling.

The claim of dwelling is not confined to the legitimization of new homes but extends to the maintenance of existing ones. In several townships, especially towards the southern end of South Uist, people are striving to keep 'the end of the road' in its literal rather than figurative domain, maintaining that dwelling in the more remote corners of Uist can and should go on. One crofter I know is engaged in a two-fronted battle with the council, a battle resulting from and oriented towards his continuity of dwelling. The first front is his ongoing struggle to ensure that his elderly mother receives the care and support to which she is legally entitled. The second front is his ongoing attempt to compel the council to incorporate (i.e. to take responsibility for) the road leading up to his house and beyond to an old house which has been renovated as a holiday cottage. He is not alone in these struggles and there is a widespread perception that South Uist in general, and the more remote southern townships in particular, are neglected by the Lewis-dominated council. The council are thought to be reluctant to provide the care due to elderly people in remote homes due to the added cost and inconvenience. As elsewhere in rural Europe, the shifting demographics of Uist life have meant that fewer old people are cared for by their own families, and thus their dependence on state care is greater. There is a widespread suspicion that elderly people are pressured into moving into care homes of one kind or another. Likewise, the council's reluctance to incorporate many roads is seen as a parallel strategy of reducing services to the point that people have little choice but to move to more centrally-located

townships and thus abandon the more southerly and easterly located places. Whether or not these claims are fair and valid is open to debate, but what is clear is that for many if not most island people, the council is perceived – like those landlords of the 18th and 19th centuries - as trying to constrain and concentrate dwelling on Uist.

The pressures on people living in South Uist are not confined to adequate social services and planning permission alone. Another great concern is the growing influence of environmental organizations and the corresponding increase in environmental legislation of one kind or another.¹³ This has been particularly marked with attempts to curtail inshore fishing, a topic about which I've written elsewhere, but also applies on land (Course, n.d.; see also Nadel-Klein, 2003). In particular, crofters feel their livelihoods much threatened by the protection afforded to ravens, hooded crows, and sea eagles, all of which take lambs during the spring. The issue of raptor control frequently becomes intertwined with the serious damage caused by the arrival of plagues of greylag geese, which decimate crops overnight. Although recent initiatives such as the Machair Life project run by the RSPB and Scottish Natural Heritage, attempt to recognize local people's environmental knowledge and to work with them in fostering wildlife-friendly practices, there is still a widely-felt perception that many such bodies would be happy to see people cleared from Uist altogether and for it to become a nature reserve and/or sporting estate, something which has indeed happened with the creation of hunting estates elsewhere in Scotland, and seems implied in current attempts to designate what were previously heavily-populated glens as "wilderness".¹⁴ The ever-encroaching red deer are emblematic of this fear, as people watch in dismay as stags munch their way through crofters' gardens. This is not a hollow fear; abundant ruins on numerous small islands to the north and west of both Scotland and Ireland bear testimony to once thriving communities. St Kilda in Scotland, evacuated in 1930, and the Blasket Islands in

Ireland, evacuated in 1953, are particularly emblematic and well-documented cases of entire communities being brought to an end (Hutchinson, 2016; Lysaght, 2006)

The greatest concern of people in Uist, and one which in many ways stems from the factors described above, is the hemorrhaging of the population. The population of South Uist now stands at 1,754 a decline of 42% over the course of the twentieth century, and of 75% since the population high of almost 7,000 in the early nineteenth century. And those that remain on Uist tend to be of the elderly generation. Lack of employment, stemming largely from inadequate infrastructure, leaves many young people with little option but to leave the island. I have heard many narratives of emptiness and emptying, of the dearth of life in once vibrant places. One evening Màiri and Dòmhnall tell me of their youth spent in the seventies and eighties when Uist was “a wild place.” They tell me of parties on beaches, in vans, in car parks and on ferries; they tell me of when, following a cattle sale, the Creagorry Hotel went down in legend (and the Guinness Book of World Records) for the most whisky sold in one night; they tell me of the Glasgow Fair when the Uist migrants returned from Glasgow for five nights of drinking; of big dances with 800 people, too crowded to even get in the door. These events are all in the past, “It’s emptying out now,” Dòmhnall tells me. Whereas other rural communities in Scotland have been reported as resenting incomers as “white settlers,” in South Uist any young families coming in are welcomed (Jedrej and Nuttall, 1996). Ishbel tells me how the township of Taobh a’ Chaolais was once full of children, playing on the beach and in the fields, going from house to house. At Halloween, a big crowd of them would go from door to door. Now there are none. Houses in which the lights once shone out, are now in darkness.

In this article I’ve suggested that houses, both new and old, both inhabited and uninhabited, both pristine and in ruins, are important because they mark human dwelling on a landscape

in which human dwelling cannot be taken for granted or guaranteed, in which, as more than one crofter put it to me, “the most endangered animal here is us.” From this perspective, there is little difference between the 4,000 year old ruins of Atlantic wheel-houses at Cladh Hallan and Dòmhnall Iain’s house built in 1982. Both mark people’s commitment to maintain Uist as a place, not a space; that is, as constituted by and inextricable from human dwelling (cf. Casey, 1996). This is the ground from which subsequent debates about identity and belonging emerge and take for granted (cf. Macdonald, 1997). For I argue that it is the continuity of dwelling with prior generations which houses index that is primary, and that encompasses and subsumes those individuals and their memories through which dwelling has been constituted. What matters most is that *somebody* dwelt there, even though precisely who this somebody might have been, may well never be known. This is one answer to the question of why houses may be demolished to create new houses, but never to leave an empty space. Such an argument builds upon prior approaches to dwelling but realigns them to focus not just on the relation between people and the world, but between people and prior generations. In sum, it leads us to recast dwelling as always cumulative.

In Sorley MacLean’s 1952 poem *Hallaig* – perhaps the best-known Gaelic poem of the twentieth century – the narrator looks out through the windows of a ruined house on the small island of Raasay, near Skye: “The window is nailed and boarded // Through which I saw the West” And the poem goes on to root us, the reader, within memories of a particular place and particular people; it could be about no other place but Hallaig. Yet, I think, the fuller meaning of the poem goes beyond memory or nostalgia, to the imagined repopulation of the entire island of Raasay, for “The dead have been seen alive” “And the girls in silent bands // go to Clachan as in the beginning.” The poem is about memory, for sure, and indeed, memory in a nostalgic mode; but the poem to my mind is about the possibilities of future dwelling which the memory and mark of the prior habitations of the dead lay the

foundation for. Memory in *Hallaig* is thus as much prospective as it is retrospective.¹⁵ Perhaps Walter Benjamin's description of ruins as "afterlife" is misleading, for the ruins of a house in South Uist possess not an afterlife, but a life, a living mark that lets us know we're in a place, not a space. To cite Pogue Harrison again, "the wherewithal of place does not pre-exist the act of building but is created by humanity's mark (2005: 18). It is as just this kind of mark that the houses of Uist, both current and past, must be understood.

Notes

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¹ For discussion of language shift in Gaelic Scotland see McLeod, 2006 and McEwan-Fujita, 2011.

² See Kohn, 2002 and Macdonald, 1997 for further discussion of the complexities of Gaelic identities. See Parman, 1990 and Ennew, 1980 for general ethnographic background to Hebridean life, and Cohen, 1987 for the social life of rural Scottish island communities more generally.

3. For detailed studies of the architecture, use, and history of Hebridean blackhouses, see Fenton, 1978 and Kissling, 1943, 1944. There is a degree of ambiguity about the etymology of the term "blackhouse". One explanation is that the Gaelic *taigh dubh* "black house" sought to differentiate the older double-walled stone houses from the newer single-walled houses which started to appear in the late 19th century and were named *taigh geal* "white house" due to their lime-washed exterior. Another explanation is that *taigh dubh* was just a mistranscription of *taigh tughaidh*, "thatched house". My friends in Uist preferred this second explanation.

⁴ See essays by Fenton, 2006; Stell, 2006; and Carruthers and Frew, 2006 for detailed accounts of changes in Scottish rural housing.

⁵ Cèilidh in the Outer Hebrides does not mean dancing. Where dancing will occur, it is known as “Cèilidh agus dannsa” i.e. ceilidh and dancing.

⁶ Not only tourists, but professional photographers have long been captivated by the aesthetics of Hebridean houses. See Strand, 1962; and John Maher’s recent “Nobody’s Home” exhibition: <http://johnmaher.co.uk/nobodys-home/>

⁷ See Hunter, 2015[1976]; Devine, 1994; and Richards, 2013 for an introduction to debates on the controversial historiography of this period.

⁸ See Stewart, 1998 for an account of the disastrous transfer of South Uist and its consequences.

⁹ From (and translated by) Maclean, 1937.

¹⁰ Public commentary on the Clearances is not limited to academia, but also occurs across the arts. See for example, John McGrath’s 1974 play “The Cheviot, The Stag, and the Black, Black Oil” or Capercaillie’s 1991 song “Waiting for the Wheel to Turn”.

¹¹ Stoler’s essay is focussed on those cases where the colonialism is clearly demarcated, both socially and temporally. In Uist, however, colonialism was a far more ambiguous, if no less damaging, phenomenon.

¹² This resonates with Paul Basu’s point that “Ironically, the most prominent ruins of the Clearance story are not of the homes from which people were ‘cleared’, but of the houses they built in the reception areas” (2000: 228).

¹³ In other parts of Highland Scotland, “heritage” plays a similar role; both a potential for income and employment but a perceived death knell for a “living” community. See Basu, 2007; Nadel-Klein 2003; and Gouriévidis, 2010 for further discussion of the double-edged nature of “heritage.”

¹⁴ See the following link for a start of a debate between geographer Fraser MacDonald and the John Muir Trust about the appropriateness (or otherwise) of promoting wildness and wilderness in Scotland: <http://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2013/07/17/against-scottish-wildness/> A more general discussion of the place of people within conservation can be found in Cronon, 1996.

¹⁵ See Murray, 2014 for a detailed account of a prospective reading of the poem.

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